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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how to measure the performance of programs by measuring the outcomes of program participation for learners. Based on studies conducted in Tennessee in which adult learners reported a broader and more complex set of outcomes than the three "core indicators" mandated by Title II of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the paper suggests that learners have a different perspective on performance than the authors of WIA and their perspectives should be considered at the policy level and by local programs. Section 1 examines performance accountability in adult basic education and how it is being applied in the WIA, the National Reporting System, and 17 state plans. Section 2 reports on findings of the Tennessee Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy and a subsequent qualitative study. The following findings of the Tennessee study of adult literacy learners are reported: (1) there is an increase in rate of employment; (2) increase in overall satisfaction with their financial situation; (3) overall increase in self esteem; (4) increase in involvement in community organizations; (5) positive change in three of eight literacy practices; and (6) increase in the number of people who thought a book was a good gift for a child. Findings from the Learner Identified Outcomes Study show that participants identified changes in their lives that can be grouped as literacy uses and changes in sense of self. Section 3 discusses implications of findings and alternative ways to assess the performance of adult basic education. (Contains 17 references.) (YLB)

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National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

OUTCOMES OF PARTICIPATION IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

by

Mary Beth Bingman

with Olga Ebert and Brenda Bell
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Outcomes of Participation in Adult Basic Education: The Importance of Learners' Perspectives

Introduction

This paper addresses an issue of concern to adult educators across the United States: how to measure the performance of programs by measuring the outcomes of program participation for learners. All federally funded programs will soon begin measuring three "core indicators" mandated by Title II of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Measurement of these core indicators will vary from state to state, but all states will use the National Reporting System (NRS) developed by the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) of the Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Based on studies conducted in Tennessee in which adult learners reported a broader and more complex set of outcomes than the WIA core measures, this paper suggests that learners have a different perspective on performance than the authors of WIA and that their perspectives should be taken into account at the policy level as well as by local programs. While these adults did report outcomes, including increased employment, that correspond with the WIA indicators, they were more likely to name outcomes related to their sense of self and to changes in how they used literacy in their everyday lives. The challenge for the adult basic education system is to develop measures of program performance that credit these more complex and nuanced changes.

The paper begins by examining performance accountability in adult basic education and how it is being applied in the Workforce Investment Act and the National Reporting System. We then report on the findings of a longitudinal study of Tennessee adult literacy learners and a subsequent qualitative study. Finally, implications of these findings and some alternative ways to assess the performance of adult basic education are discussed.

Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education

The current focus in adult basic education on measuring outcomes is part of a larger concern with performance that permeates government. There are many ways to judge the successful performance of a program. Performance accountability systems focus on judging policies and programs by measuring their outcomes or results against agreed-upon standards (Brizius and Campbell, 1991), rather than on, for example, the number of people served or services offered.

In her recent review of performance accountability in adult education, Juliet Merrifield discussed the "dramatic changes of emphasis which have brought the accountability debate to center stage" (Merrifield, 1998, p. 4). These include:

- Societal changes such as increased globalization, concerns about workforce competitiveness and immigration, and welfare reform.

- Governmental changes in response to demands for more efficiency and "better return on investment", including the Governmental Performance and Results Act that requires federal agencies to establish and report on long-term and annual goals.
- Changes in the K-12 educational system in response to economic and societal change, including Goals 2000 and a push for family literacy.
- A definition of literacy in terms of function and competencies.

Merrifield concludes that "The social impacts of literacy appear to be the guiding purpose for public investment in literacy education" (p. 12).

Achieving social policy goals has been among the purposes for adult education in the United States for many years. Quigley (1997) reviews the social purposes for which literacy education has been used: to integrate new immigrants, to teach moral lessons, as a tool in the War on Poverty, and today, to combat crime and strengthen the economy. However, while there have been many social policy goals for adult literacy education in the past, programs were not evaluated on whether or not they met these goals.

The 1991 National Literacy Act defined literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak English, and to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society" and also included the more individual purposes of "to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (National Literacy Act of 1991, sec. 3). While the 1991 law addressed social policy goals, defining literacy in terms of adults' need to "function," the legislation also included the idea that people might want education for their own reasons and value knowledge for its own sake. Performance of adult education programs under the National Literacy Act was assessed more in terms of program quality than by outcomes in learners' lives.

Assessment of performance changed in the 1998 Workforce Investment Act. Under WIA the social policy goals are specified; adult education services are authorized in order to assist adults to become employed, be involved in their children's education, and gain a secondary credential (GED or high school diploma). Programs are held accountable for meeting these goals. Instead of assessing programs by the quality of their curricula and instruction, support for professional development, or breadth of programming, states are required to set up performance accountability systems and assess adult basic education programs on their success at achieving particular policy outcomes.

Workforce Investment Act

The purpose of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, is to provide adult education services in order to:

> (1) assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency;
> (2) assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become

full partners in the educational development of their children; and
(3) assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education. (P.L. 105-220)

Language about meeting personal goals or developing knowledge, which was included in the 1991 legislation, is absent in WIA.

WIA mandates a performance accountability system in order "to assess the effectiveness of eligible agencies in achieving continuous improvement of adult education and literacy activities funded under this subtitle, in order to optimize the return on investment of Federal funds in adult education and literacy activities" (P.L. 105-220). States are required to set levels of performance for three core indicators:

(i) Demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels in reading, writing, and speaking the English language, numeracy, problem solving, English language acquisition, and other literacy skills.
(ii) Placement in, retention in, or completion of postsecondary education, unsubsidized employment or career advancement.
(iii) Receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent. (P.L. 105-220)

The WIA performance accountability system is based on measures of progress in relation to these three core indicators. In their Adult Education and Family Literacy plans submitted to the federal Division of Adult Education and Literacy, states have established performance targets for each indicator. Performance on these core indicators will be reported by the states annually, using the National Reporting System described below. States will be responsible for collecting data on the core indicators and reporting the aggregated data to the Department of Education. The states may choose to identify additional indicators, but these will not be used to assess performance at the Federal level.

The WIA accountability system operates on two levels. On the federal level, the Division of Adult Education and Literacy will use data on the core indicators in their reports to Congress on the effectiveness of adult education, to publish state-by-state comparisons, and as part of determining states' eligibility for certain incentive grants established under WIA. States will use the core indicators along with other state-identified factors in assessing program performance and in determining allocation of funds.

National Reporting System

The National Reporting System for Adult Education has been developed by the American Institutes for Research under contract to the Division of Adult Education and Literacy. This system establishes measures for the core indicators required by the Workforce Investment Act. The development of the NRS began as the National Outcomes Reporting System Project. That project (begun before WIA was enacted) was developed in response to the concerns of state directors of adult education about performance accountability. The original system was to focus on seven categories of outcomes endorsed by state directors: economic impact, credentials,

learning gains, family impact, further education and training, community impact, and customer satisfaction (Condelli & Kutner, 1997).

The National Reporting System now being implemented focuses on the three core indicators. The measures to be reported include: educational gains, entering or retaining employment, and placement in postsecondary education or passing the GED test (DAEL / NRS, 1999). In addition to the outcome measures, the NRS will collect data on descriptive measures (student demographics, reasons for enrolling, and student status) and participation (contact hours and enrollment in special programs).

As can be seen in the NRS graphic reproduced below, the attainment of the goals of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act is to be measured in large part by the achievement of basic academic skills that are measured in most states by standardized tests. The limited connection between goals and indicators has happened in part because Congress did not establish core indicators for family literacy. And while the purposes of WIA refer to the "knowledge and skills necessary" for employment and self-sufficiency, these were not defined.

Goals and Core Indicators of WIA
Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and NRS Core Outcome Measures

Goals of Adult Education Described in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of WIA	*Core Indicators* Required by the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of WIA	National Reporting System *Core Outcome Measures*
Assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency. Assist parents to obtain the skills necessary to be full partners in their children's educational development.	Improvements in literacy skill levels in reading, writing and speaking the English language, numeracy, problem-solving, English language acquisition, other literacy skills.	• Educational gains (achieve skills to advance educational functioning level)
	Placement in, retention in, or completion of, postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement.	• Entered employment • Retained employment • Placement in postsecondary education or training
Assist adults in the completion of secondary school education.	Receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent.	• Receipt of a secondary school diploma or pass GED test

(NRS, 1999, p. 6)

Educational gains are to be measured by movement from one to another of six "educational functioning levels" which include: Beginning ABE Literacy, Beginning Basic Education, Low Intermediate Basic Education, High Intermediate Basic Education, Low Adult Secondary Education, High Adult Secondary Education. The English as a Second Language (ESL) levels are: Beginning ESL Literacy, Beginning ESL, Low Intermediate ESL, High Intermediate ESL, Low Advanced ESL, and High Advanced ESL (DAEL / NRS, 1999, p.6). For each level the NRS has identified descriptors in three areas: Basic Reading and Writing, Numeracy Skills, and Functional and Workplace Skills for ABE; and Speaking and Listening, Basic Reading and Writing, and Functional Workplace Skills for ESL. For example, the ability to complete medical forms is a functional skill at the Low Intermediate Basic Education Level, and reading text about and explaining the use of a complex piece of machinery is a workplace skill at the High Adult Secondary Level. The ability to participate in a conversation in some social situations is a descriptor for speaking and listening in the High Intermediate ESL level.

Placement of adult learners in these levels is conducted at enrollment and again after pre-determined time periods while the adult is an active student. All programs in a state must use the same assessment procedure. While the NRS states *"Their inclusion in no way is meant to imply that the tests are equivalent or that they should be used as the basis for assessment"* [italics in original] (DAEL / NRS, 1999, p. 19), test benchmarks are provided for each educational functioning level. The NRS assumes that increases in scores on standardized tests like the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) will indicate increases in skills and, therefore, in functioning levels.

Employment and postsecondary education and training measures and receipt of a secondary credential are follow-up measures to be collected after students leave a program. These measures are collected only for those adults whose goals include employment, further education, or a secondary credential. States may use either survey or data matching (using Social Security numbers) methodologies for the follow-up measures for employment and secondary credentials.

State Plans

The Workforce Investment Act mandates three core indicators of performance, and the Division of Adult Education and Literacy requires use of the National Reporting System for reporting on the indicators beginning July 1, 2000. However, the states will have some flexibility in how these requirements are implemented. States have a choice of measure of educational gain; they may use a standardized test like TABE or CASAS or "a performance assessment with standardized scoring protocols" (DAEL / NRS, 1999, p. 13). This choice will have implications beyond the process of reporting. Performance-based assessments can be tied more directly to learners' goals for adult basic education and may give a better indication of how programs are meeting the three goals of Title II of WIA. However, these assessments are not in common use, nor identified in the NRS.

States also have the option of using the "secondary measures" established by the NRS. These measures are similar to the ones that the state directors endorsed in earlier development of the reporting system: reduction of public assistance, passing the citizenship examination, voting or registering to vote for the first time, more involvement in community groups or activities, increased involvement in children's literacy activities and/or education. The NRS suggests using these measures only for learners who have these goals. There is also a measure of goal accomplishment for so-called "project learners" who have a limited (30 hours of instruction) goal of a specific workplace-related literacy skill. While these measures are part of the NRS and can be reported to the federal government, they will not be used to assess performance under WIA at the federal level. States may use these secondary measures as well as others they may identify as part of their state performance accountability system.

In order to gain a clearer picture of how states are assessing their own performance, the authors have informally surveyed the DAEL's regional coordinators and examined seventeen state plans. What we have found is summarized in the following table. These results are not final since state plans are being revised, but most states are using standardized tests as the educational gains assessment measure. About half the states have included measures of performance in addition to the WIA core indicators.

Table 1. State Plans Summarized

Region	Assessment	Additional indicators
Midwest: ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, IA, MO, WI, IL, MI, IN, OH	Standardized tests, including TABE, CASAS, ABLE.	One state uses additional indicators in the areas of computer literacy and family literacy.
West: AZ, NM, WA, OR, CO, CA, UT, NV, ID, MT, WY, AK, HI	All states are using primarily CASAS.	Five states use additional indicators.
South: AL, LA, NC, OK, TN, TX, WV, KY, AR, SC, VA, GA, FL, MS	TABE is used most often, also ABLE and CASAS. One state mentions using portfolio assessment.	Ten states use additional indicators: student retention; meeting individual learner goals; enrollment; staff development; offering support services and computer programs; children's school readiness in family literacy programs.
East: NY, VT, NH, ME, MA, CT, RI, NJ, DE, MD, DC, PA, PR	Different types of standardized tests are used as well as alternative assessment in some states.	Eleven states use additional indicators: recruitment; professional development; support services; meeting student goals; attendance; vote registration; removal from public assistance; family literacy; customer satisfaction; improved health practices; level completion; further education; higher wages and benefits; technology.

Adult basic education programs are being asked to be accountable for their performance in meeting the policy goals of Congress. But the purpose of adult basic education as defined by Congress in WIA and the performance accountability system being developed in response to WIA are much narrower than the goals of many adult learners. This system will essentially measure gains on standardized tests, employment status, secondary credential, and entry to post-secondary training. The outcomes on which performance will be assessed do not include all of the particular, contextually-determined outcomes that learners in our research have described.

Outcomes reported by learners

Two studies recently conducted in Tennessee suggest that additional outcome measures (and methodologies) may be needed to capture the whole picture. The Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants in Tennessee collected data from 1992 to 1995 and included baseline interviews with 450 adult students who enrolled in beginning ABE classes. Key findings include an increase in rate of employment and various changes in literacy practices. The subsequent Learner Identified Outcomes study was based on qualitative life history interviews conducted in 1997 and 1998 with ten adults who had originally been part of the longitudinal study. These adults reported new and expanded literacy uses in many areas of their lives and positive changes in their sense of self.

The Tennessee Longitudinal Study

The primary objective of the Tennessee Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants study was to expand understanding of how participation in literacy programs changes adults' quality of life. The study focused on four main areas:

- socio-economic well-being (jobs, income, survival)
- social well-being (family and community life)
- personal well-being (self esteem, life satisfaction)
- physical well-being (health and access to health care)

Adult learners from nine ABE Level-1 programs from across the 95 counties of the state of Tennessee were interviewed for this study. Participants in three cohorts (1992, 1993, 1994) were given a baseline interview as they enrolled in ABE programs. All had scored below the sixth-grade level on the ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Exam) reading test. Those who had indicated they were willing, participated in follow-up interviews at approximately one-year intervals. The study was designed to continue for five years and include qualitative (individual, program, and community case studies) as well as quantitative data. However, funding was interrupted, and the study was not completed. The interviews that were conducted are summarized in Table 2.

Two earlier reports (Merrifield, Smith, Rea, and Shriver, 1993, and Merrifield, Smith, Rea, and Crosse, 1994) examined the composition of Cohorts One and Two and changes found in the first follow-up interviews with Cohort One. At that point analysis was suspended. In 1999 a report (Bingman, Ebert, & Smith, in press) examining the changes found in the first follow-up interviews from the combined three Cohorts (N=199) was completed.

Table 2. Tennessee Longitudinal Study Interviews

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Total
Baseline	133	149	168	450
Follow-up 1	70	64	65	199
Follow-up 2	45	39		84
Follow-up 3	35			35

The questionnaire used in this study included 116 questions. To examine socio-economic well-being, respondents were asked about their employment and sources of income, as well as about other activities used to make ends meet. Social well-being was examined through questions relating to family and community involvement. The personal well-being of respondents was examined with questions pertaining to self-esteem and lifestyle. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which examines self-esteem, was selected because it has been widely used with different populations and because it is one of the shorter self-esteem instruments. To examine physical well-being, students were asked about their health and access to health care. In addition to these major areas, respondents were asked general demographic questions. The follow-up questionnaires included many of the same questions as the baseline questionnaire, as well as some new ones that asked people to reflect on changes in their lives. For the 1999 report, the 56 questions common to baseline and follow-up questionnaires were analyzed.

From the combined cohorts, 199 adults participated in a follow-up interview. The demographic information for these subjects is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Longitudinal Study Follow-up One Participants

Gender		Age			Race			Married		Grade completed				
male	female	16-24	25-44	45+	white	black	other	yes	no	Less than 6th	6th-9th	10th-12th	urban	rural
43%	57%	18%	57%	25%	60%	38%	2%	46%	54%	12%	53%	35%	47%	53%

Readers should be aware of the limitations of this research. The sample size was small, and learner attrition over time resulted in further decrease in sample sizes. All the data in the study were self-reported. There was no comparison group in this study. It was beyond the means of the research team to obtain a representative sample of adults who would be eligible for the study but did not enroll in ABE (a current longitudinal study being conducted by NCSALL will have a comparison group.) Within these limitations, the study provides learners' responses to a wide variety of potential outcomes and contributes to our understanding of the impacts of ABE participation in learners' lives.

In the analysis of the follow-up interviews of the combined cohorts, a number of important changes were found. Approximately one year after enrollment in adult literacy classes these adults reported changes in various aspects of their lives. These include:

- An increase in rate of employment from 32% to 48%.
- An increased overall satisfaction with their financial situation in Cohorts 2 and 3 ($p<.05$).
- An overall increase in self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale) from 3.52 to 3.66 on a 5 point scale ($p<.01$).
- Increased involvement in community (religious, PTA, social/sports) organizations ($p<.05$). There was also a marginally significant increase in voter registration ($p<.06$).
- Positive changes in three of eight literacy practices examined (paying bills, working with numbers on the job, needing to memorize because of limited reading ability) ($p<.05$).
- Increase in the number of people who thought a book was a good gift for a child ($p<.05$).

Some of these changes, reported after one year and often limited hours of participation (available for 189 of the participants—60 had more than 80 instructional hours and 129 had less), do not seem to represent major transformations in learners' lives. But small changes in trajectory can lead to a major change of direction. These small changes, in combination and over time, may well lead to more substantial changes as adult learners expand the scope and level of the ways they use literacy.

The Learner Identified Outcomes Study

The Learner Identified Outcomes study used a life history methodology to build an understanding of the outcomes of participation in adult literacy education on the lives of adult learners. The ten participants were selected from those Longitudinal Study participants who had at least 80 instructional hours and had a follow-up interview in 1995 (the last year of the longitudinal study). This small sample was constructed to be as representative demographically of the Tennessee ABE population as possible.

Table 4. Participants in Learner Identified Outcomes Study

Name	Gender	Race	Location	DOB	Employment facts	High school or equivalent	Grade completed
Bert	m	b	Urban	1970	Some past employment, mostly temporary.	To go to military	9
Elizabeth	f	b	Urban	1933	Long-term employment in a restaurant (same employer). Now retired.	Wanted to get education, important to me	7
Harry	m	w	Small town	1924	Long-term employment with in manufacturing with two employers. Now retired.	Always wanted a diploma	8
June	f	w	Urban	1966	Little past employment. Now is working as a kitchen aide	Get GED to get a job and job training	9
Kris	f	w	Small town	1968	Some past employment as an assistant manager and in chicken processing plant.	Better job, get off AFDC & Food Stamps	9
Laura	f	b	Urban	1952	Past employment in service jobs and manufacturing.	To learn spelling, reading, math, to better self, support family	12
Marvin	m	b	Rural	1945	Long-term w/ same employer (truck-driver & mechanic). Now retired due to health.	To learn to read and write, improve basic skills and self as citizen	5
Ruth	f	w	Small town	1955	Long-term employment in food processing	GED to get better job	8
Suzanne	f	w	Small town	1966	Past employment in manufacturing. Resumed work last year.	Get GED to go to factory	10
Will	m	w	Small town	1945	Long-term employment in manufacturing.	Better job & benefits; to prove I can do it	8

The primary source of data for this study was extended recorded conversations with the ten participants about their lives before and after enrollment in adult literacy programs. The interviews, usually conducted in participants' homes, covered their adult education experiences, their family and work lives, their childhood and earlier schooling, and the changes in their lives that they attributed to adult education participation.

The data from the interviews were analyzed using an inductive iterative process. We noted both particular stories and common themes and categories. The broad categories that cut across all interviews were, to some extent, determined by the questions asked, e.g. work, adult education, early schooling, and family. We also identified themes that emerged from the interviews that cut across categories, e.g. value of education, impact of poverty and race on education, literacy practices, and sense of self.

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This study explored the lives of these ten adults as well as their definitions of outcomes of participation in adult basic education. Their lives established the contexts for the outcomes. All of the participants had been employed, many at the same job for many years. Only one person was currently dependent on public assistance. Nine of the participants had children, and all reported being involved in their children's education. Of their 18 adult children, all but one completed high school and eight had attended college. Eight of their children are still in school. Many of these people had already met the goals of WIA for self-sufficiency and partnership in their children's education. However, their participation in adult basic education was important to them (four had re-enrolled when interviewed) and led to positive changes in their lives.

Study participants identified a variety of changes in their lives that they attributed to their participation in adult literacy education. Some of the adults in this study reported outcomes that correspond to the goals of WIA. Two of them passed the GED test, gaining a secondary credential. Of the seven who had employment as a goal, four were employed when interviewed. However, they reported many other changes that were particular to the individuals and the contexts of their lives. These were the changes that seemed to make the most difference in their lives, and these changes are grouped here as "literacy uses" and "changes in sense of self."

Literacy Uses

Nine of the participants reported acquiring new literacy skills from their participation in adult literacy programs. For eight, these new skills in reading, writing, and computation led to changes in the ways they use literacy in their lives. Some of the changes were in the practical everyday activities of peoples' lives:

> *Fix my own money order out. I fill all my own money order and everything.* [Elizabeth]

> *I think I write more [letters to family] now. And I think that I write better. Before I just wrote everything straight. I did not even know what a paragraph was. And sometimes I used words that shouldn't even be there in that paragraph. Now that I know about it, I may use different words.* [Ruth]

> *And also the adult classes taught me how to read a map. I learned how to find myself around here in town with the little yellow map book when I had to go out and look for apartments.* [Laura]

Some were able to carry out work functions more easily:

> *But while I went down there, [to class] it really made a difference, you know, like on where I work now, I fill out, you've got to fill out your tickets on what you run, you got to keep the account on it, you've got to go through all this and fill it out, date it and what it is and all that. And it's helped me on all of that.* [Will]

While most of those with children had already been involved in their children's education, new literacy skills expanded this involvement for some:

> *My little grandbaby now, I've learned so many things that I try to teach him a lot of things that I could not teach him when he first came to us.* [Marvin]

In addition to the new uses of literacy in carrying out the activities of their lives, the participants also described increased access to and understanding of expository text. Five people talked about the more extensive reading they now do and how that reading has expanded their understanding of the world or themselves.

> *You see, the news talks about what's going on overseas and stuff. You [I] read the book, and I can understand what's going on over there now. Before, I didn't know. I thought, well, that's just news, something to report, that's it. Then after I read the book and learned how this become, I understood more. I was, "OK, now this is how this ended up at." I'd be walking in there to get something, and something about overseas happen [on television]. I'd stop and come back in here. "Wait a minute now, I've got to catch this." Grow interested now. I understand more now.* [June]

> *I learned to read my Bible even better and to form my more closer relationship with the Lord.* [Laura]

Some of the changes in literacy uses that were reported by the adults in this study included new uses; for example, Elizabeth's ability to purchase her own money orders. Others, like Will, were better able to carry out activities such as completing job reports that they had previously found troublesome. For several, reading became an activity that is a part of their life instead of a tool used with difficulty. Will, for example, went from occasionally glancing at newspapers to reading them as "an every night thing." Changes in literacy uses are related to changes in people's lives, changes that expand what they are able to do, what they are concerned with, and how they feel about themselves.

Sense of self

The adults in this study are in many ways ordinary adults: they had had jobs, had raised families, are involved in community activities. They are people who are resilient and who have a strong sense of their own abilities and their self-efficacy. Even so, these adults also described positive changes in their sense of self that they attributed to their participation in adult literacy programs. Three participants talked about losing their sense of shame at being in a literacy class:

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> *And I was shamed, that's another thing. I couldn't see myself going to class, grown man, fifty years old almost, sitting up in class. And just was embarrassing to me. But after I started and I seen more than just me sitting there, some people were sixty and seventy years old, I said, "Why should I be ashamed? There's some people older than I am." And, hey, I got more into it.* [Marvin]

Four of the participants, the two who passed the GED test and the two who reported the most limited reading skills at enrollment, expressed a strong sense of accomplishment.

> *It made a whole lot of difference how I feel about myself because I feel better about myself since I learned how to read better. I feel like I'm somebody. You feel better about yourself when you learn how to do a lot of things for yourself you know.* [Elizabeth]

> *Four times and I finally, finally done it [passed the GED]. And it was all kinds of certificates. I got them all on my wall, you know, and I keep looking at them and think, "Well, I did that."* [Suzanne]

A new and stronger voice or new opportunities to express themselves were reported by three participants as Ruth described:

> *And also about speaking up. I can do this better now. Like recently, at my work, I was scheduled to have a vacation for Christmas. And then my supervisor comes to me and says that this other woman will get the Christmas week off, not me. And I was already scheduled, and she even had less seniority. So I spoke up. I said, "No, it isn't right. I want my vacation." And I got it. And before I was so shy.* [Ruth]

The people in this study described new uses of literacy. These literacy practices were often important because of the social situations in which they occurred. Literacy uses and sense of self often seemed to intersect. So, for example, Marvin had always met with his friends and talked about events; but now he can use the knowledge that he has gained from reading the newspapers in these conversations. It is not that Marvin "had low self-esteem" before; but now he feels differently because of his improved literacy abilities. He has read articles in the paper that his friends have read and *"so we can discuss this matter."* June felt confident enough to take a job in a nursing home kitchen where she is not only able to read the labels on trays, but has started an informal English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program teaching new words to a fellow employee.

> *He brings the book in with the English words in it. It helps me and it helps him. I figured, "Why not try it?"* [June]

The outcomes of participation in literacy classes described by the adults in this study went far beyond new skills or educational gains. They are now able take part in new activities that have bettered their lives, and in many instances, the lives of those with whom they interact.

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Why this matters -- Broadening what we measure

The Workforce Investment Act is law, and a National Reporting System is being established. Why should policy makers and program staff in adult basic education concern themselves with what some Tennessee adult learners[1] had to say about outcomes? Students say participation in adult education builds their sense of self. As people gain new literacy skills they engage in new literacy practices. But what does this mean about measuring program performance? If we want our programs to meet the needs of adult learners, it means a great deal.

The learners in these studies reported changes in their lives that were varied, contextual, and inter-related. Measuring changes in educational levels with standardized tests will not give programs and policy makers information about these outcomes. The tests are neither broad enough nor sensitive enough to capture the changes that matter to learners or to measure the performance of programs in supporting these changes. Some changes; such as the increases in voter registration and community involvement found in the longitudinal study, might be identified in those states that use the NRS secondary measures; but many of the changes that were reported, for example new literacy practices or changes in sense of self, will not be identified or counted by the WIA indicators.

Even when these learners met the measures mandated in the NRS (retained employment, obtained a GED) these measures do not reveal the meaning of these changes in context. These core indicators do not tell us enough about the reality of people's lives. For example, one participant who already had a high school diploma reported she could not spell well enough to do jobs for which she was physically able. In her life, a secondary credential did not translate into employment. And of the four people in the qualitative study who were employed, three were in jobs requiring no more education than the jobs they had had before participating in literacy programs. They were as, but no more, self-sufficient as before they enrolled. Achievement of mandated measures does not necessarily mean positive changes in learners' lives.

The core indicators required by the Workforce Investment Act define a limited approach to adult literacy education. Adult educators tend to focus efforts on what is measured and reported, particularly if funding is tied to it. Are we measuring and focusing on what is important? It is not clear that a consensus on desired outcomes has been reached or that everyone, particularly

[1] The findings of changed literacy practices and more positive sense of self are consistent with those of earlier studies. From the twenty-three studies reviewed by Beder (1999), the following potential outcomes of participation in ABE programs emerged as most conclusive: gains in employment and in earnings; positive influence on continuing education; self-reported gains in basic skills; positive impact on learners' self-image and on involvement in their children's education. Fingeret and Danin (1991) identified improvement in literacy skills and changes in literacy practices, as well as acquiring more positive attitudes and beliefs as impacts of participation in the Literacy Volunteers in New York city. Fingeret *et al.* (1994) also found increased self-concept and self-confidence, growth of cultural awareness, women's empowerment, and more involvement with children's work to be among the outcomes of the two literacy programs in British Columbia. Among the literacy practice outcomes, they describe more use of writing, improved job performance and being qualified for better jobs, and new activities that participants were not able to do before.

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learners, have had a voice in determining what is measured. Adult basic education runs the risk of not meeting the needs of those adults whose goals for participation in adult education do not include (or go beyond) employment or a secondary credential. Adults whose goals are not being addressed by adult education programs will leave.

Performance accountability—judging programs by results—assumes a consensus on standards and goals as well as effective ways to measure outcomes and results. Performance accountability is a driving force in adult basic education, but there is no consensus about goals. Effective tools for measuring the complex variety of outcomes that learners report, or even the narrower goals of WIA, do not exist.

Adult education programs should be accountable for their performance. But their understanding of performance needs to be broad enough to take into account the varied needs and wants of adult learners and the varied contexts of their communities. Adult educators need to value the achievement of both policy goals and learners' goals. To understand the true impact of their programs, adult educators need to pay more attention to the varied outcomes in learners' lives and communities. True assessment of program performance cannot be tied to a few limited measures.

If policy makers and practitioners in adult basic education want to address performance measurement in ways that take into account the varied goals and life contexts of adult learners, they need a new approach to accountability. There are three promising efforts underway that do not depend on a few core indicators and scores on standardized tests: expanded use of Program Quality Indicators, local documentation of learner goals and outcomes, and the Equipped for the Future initiative.

Program Quality Indicators

In the 1991 National Literacy Act, adult basic education programs were required to develop indicators of program quality. These varied from state to state and even from program to program. Providers defined a quality program and determined what indicators would show that they were providing quality program services. The indicators focused on inputs such as teacher training and the number of classes offered, on processes like record keeping and professional development, and on outputs of the program such as retention rates and gains on standardized tests.

The PQI process did not go far enough and was not sufficiently standardized within and across states to allow for the kind of comparisons among programs that WIA attempts to accomplish. Program Quality needs to be taken another step. Colleges and universities are accredited based on what they offer and the quality of their institutions. Comings and Stein (1991) have suggested a similar accreditation process for adult basic education. Reaching consensus on what constitutes a quality program and what level of quality is appropriate for adult basic education would be a complex, long-term process, but one with which states already have some experience.

Documenting Outcomes at the Program Level

Developing ways to document outcomes on the local program level has been the focus of a NCSALL action research project in Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky. Three programs are working with learners to develop processes to identify and document outcomes in learners' lives. Two sites have developed documentation processes based on learner-identified goals and one is developing a process to document learner performance on the Equipped for the Future standard, Take Responsibility for Learning.

For example, in a rural Kentucky program, students determined that they shared the goal of supporting their children's education and identified a variety of indicators of such support, including reading to their children, getting them to school every day, and talking with their children's teachers. Parents record these activities on a calendar checklist as a way to document the outcomes of support for their children's education. The program hopes to have access to children's report cards (with parents' cooperation and permission) to assess impact on the children's schooling. The process of working with students to identify their goals and document outcomes has led the program staff to integrate these goals into program curriculum.

The action research teams hope to address both the requirements of their states' performance accountability systems and to measure their programs' success at meeting student-identified goals. The teams are meeting with state staff to explore ways that local documentation could become part of performance data reported to the state adult education offices.

Equipped for the Future

Equipped for the Future is probably the most ambitious effort to broaden the ways adult basic education is assessed. This national standards-based system reform initiative, sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, will provide a common framework for defining, tracking, and reporting results to policymakers, as well as to students and their local programs. Developed through a multi-year field-based research process, the EFF framework consists of:

- Four purposes for learning, defined originally by adult learners and validated by a wide range of adults
- Three "maps" that define successful performance of the roles of worker, citizen, and family member
- Thirteen activities that are common across these three roles
- Sixteen skill standards, derived from the role maps, which provide specific and measurable statements of what adults need to know and be able to do, clustered in four categories: communications skills, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills, and lifelong learning skills

According to Stein (1999), the EFF framework provides the definition of "results that matter": "If we concentrate on building competence across the standards identified in the framework, we

will be building the skills and knowledge adults need to carry out the primary responsibilities of their adult roles." Valid and reliable criterion-referenced assessments are essential for a learning system focused on helping adults achieve their goals and be successful in their primary roles needs. EFF has entered the next phase of development work, that of shaping an assessment framework and assessment tools and instruments that focus on the whole circle of EFF skills. This work includes the specific tasks of :

- Defining the EFF continuum of performance;
- Developing a continuum of performance for each EFF standard, with levels that benchmark key performances;
- Developing tools to assess performance of each standard for the range of assessment purposes, and
- Developing a broad "qualifications framework" that focuses on integrated performance across standards, with levels that represent real world benchmarks. (Stein, in press)

EFF holds the promise of being the most systematic approach to measuring the development and application of skills that enable adults to carry out their life roles: in other words, to achieve desired outcomes that benefit themselves and society as a whole. By defining a set of results or outcomes (not an exhaustive set, but a commonly agreed-upon set that enable achievement of policy goals), and expressing these results in terms that are measurable, programs can teach to these outcomes and measure the progress of students toward achieving them (as well as to other student—or program—defined goals). How this works in practice will be seen during the next two years as EFF continues its field-based research and development work.

Conclusion

The Workforce Investment Act, however limited, provides the basis for the beginning of a national performance accountability system for adult education. For the present, this will be the system that defines performance for federally-funded adult education programs. The system established under WIA should be made as inclusive as possible. As states determine how they will measure educational gains for the NRS, they should consider using measures other than standardized tests. The ways learners define their goals and describe the changes they have seen in their lives should inform state policy makers' decisions regarding the indicators by which program performance will be measured. As they revise their adult education plans, states should include a variety of indicators that take into account the many ways in which programs impact learners. As the inevitable "disconnects" and contradictions built into WIA begin to become apparent, adult educators should be certain that their Congressional representatives are made aware of what it not working and why.

There are many aspects of adult education in the United States that could be improved. But adult educators need ways of identifying what is working, as well as what is not. There are promising initiatives underway that may enable programs to more fully align the adult education system with the lives and goals of learners as well as with the social policy needs of the larger public.

An expanded model of performance assessment would begin with indicators from WIA and NRS and add indicators of program quality and measures of a wider range of outcomes that draw from EFF and investigations such as the ones reported here. Adult learners, adult educators, and adult education policy makers must continue to engage in building accountability systems that recognize the many, varied contributions education can make in the lives of adult learners.

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NCSALL

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

The Mission of NCSALL

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) will pursue basic and applied research in the field of adult basic education, build partnerships between researchers and practitioners, disseminate research and best practices to practitioners, scholars and policymakers, and work with the field to develop a comprehensive research agenda.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and World Education. The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University are NCSALL's partners. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and OERI's National Institute for Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning.

NCSALL's Research Projects

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English to Speakers of Other Languages, and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) learner motivation, (2) classroom practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) staff development, and (4) assessment.

Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that the results of research reach practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education. NCSALL publishes a quarterly magazine entitled *Focus on Basics*; an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research and best practices entitled *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*; and periodic research reports and articles entitled *NCSALL Reports* and *NCSALL Occasional Papers*. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Practitioner Dissemination and Research Network, designed to link practitioners and researchers and to help practitioners apply findings from research in their classrooms and programs. NCSALL also has a web site:

http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall

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